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Showpiece spade

THE SPOOK WHO SAT BY THE DOOR by Sam Greenlee (Allison and Busby 30s)

I SUPPOSE it is possible to read this first novel by an American Negro writer as a chilling entertainment or thriller on the theme of black militancy and leave it at that. I wish I could, but it seems to me the issues it raises lift it to another level of discussion. The book links hands with other recent works by Negro writers: 'The Man Who Cried I Am,' by John A. Williams, James Baldwin's last novel, 'Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone,' and—newest of all—Eldridge Cleaver's autobiographical assemblage, 'Soul on Ice.'

All these writings, whether fact or fiction, share common concerns, common faults, a common anger. It's the anger which inspires the faults: the intolerable pressure of being black in a white society (in so far as I can imagine it, and these books help me to) sometimes leads on the page to great leaks of rhetoric, more often to drastic simplifications of all those characters who are not black. Mr Greenlee, in particular, appears to find it hard to distinguish between us. We're 'Whitey' and had better know it.

His very cool hero, Dan Freeman, is a natural revolutionary, 1960s style. A senator up for re-election needs the Negro vote: why not accuse the Central Intelligence Agency of discrimination in its hirings? In panic, the CIA screen out 20 or so bright black men and put them through a tough training programme, trusting all will fall by the wayside. Freeman, by being cunningly anonymous and subservient among his bourgeois classmates, is the only one to sneak through. He wears a gold-edged cap on a tooth, nasty clothes, and a slow accent. After five years with the CIA as their 'showpiece spade' (*spook*, in American slang, means both CIA agent and Negro, a grim confusion fully exploited by Mr Greenlee), he leaves Washington for Chicago and a resumption of social work. Now his acquired skills come to full use. Under cover of his pacifist function, he enlists a top local gang, the Cobras, as his first storm troops: they rob the National Guard Armoury and a bank. No one suspect Negroes of such coups. In the end, e is betrayed by one of his own colour, but not before having established a military chain-of-command living major cities. I'd forgotten to ty that there is some intermittent hmour, most notably in a short interew with the President.

What terrifies me is noso much tho deliberate, coaching sideof the enterprise (it is too dream-ke in some details to become a hndbook for revolutionaries), but rater the total alienation from 'white 'society that it implies in every line. Yell, perhaps, not every line. One wekend, Freeman 'visited the ewly-opened Guggenheim and decidedthat Wright had goofed, but he njoyed the Kandinskys.' Even Witey could behave, and write, in thi silly, summary fashion.

John Cleman